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ABSTRACT

Problems related to elementary school students' ability to read social studies materials are discussed. Emphasis is placed on the task that confronts the student while reading social studies and on the teacher's role in helping students improve their reading skills. Vocabulary is identified as the major factor contributing to reading difficulties. Five categories of vocabulary are discussed--standard (normal words used in reading and/or conversation), transitional (one meaning in a student's real life situation and another in social studies), technical (seldom encountered except in social studies texts), changeable (meanings vary within the context of social studies), and phrases (groups of words which do not function in an adjective-noun relationship. Suggestions to remedy problems associated with these categories of vocabulary words include preparing slow readers with more advanced peer tutors, preparing guides to direct students to ideas within specified paragraphs on particular pages, offering oral as well as written examinations, exploring multiple meanings of words with students, and exposing students frequently to non-familiar words. (DB)

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HOW TO REDUCE VOCABULARY INTERFERENCE WHEN TEACHING ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES

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HOW TO REDUCE VOCABULARY INTERFERENCE WHEN TEACHING ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES

Recent studies related to students' ability to read social studies materials with understanding are disappointing. Campbell (1972) found that over one-fifth of junior-high level students were unable to read social studies materials for understanding despite direct training.

Part of the problem can be directly attributed to students' low reading levels. Karlin (1969) estimates that about 25 percent of all high school students are reading disabled, i.e. reading at least two years below grade level. Banks, 1973; and Wolfe, 1974 indicate that such limited reading abilities have direct, averse impact on the reading associated with social studies.

A second factor must be placed with the social studies teacher. Few content area teachers are aware of the reading/study skills necessary for successful reading of social studies textbooks. Still fewer lack the skills to adjust instruction to meet student needs (Arnold and Sherry, 1975; Herman, 1969; Roeder, Beal, and Eller, 1973).

A third factor is the difficult reading style in the social studies textbook. Most high school content textbooks are virtually unreadable. The concept load is too high, the language is complex; the textbook becomes a hindrance rather than a learning aid (Herman, 1969; Johnson and Vardian, 1973; Hash, 1974). One major factor which contributes to this high level of text readability that is clear to all social studies teachers is the vocabulary. Teachers continually complain that students fail to adequately master the terminology. And, once learned, the vocabulary is too easily forgotten. Many cite difficult vocabulary as a major stumbling block to understanding in the social studies classroom. What causes this difficulty? What steps can the social studies teacher take to remedy it?

Vocabulary Levels in Social Studies

The teacher must become aware of the task that confronts the student while reading social studies. There are five levels of vocabulary which the student must simultaneously interpret when reading the textbook. Students must be able to adequately function on each level, at once, in order to gain information and understanding. Each of these levels has a different intent; the teacher's approach to dealing with student difficulty on each of these levels should vary accordingly.

A. Standard Vocabulary. These are words used in normal reading and/or

conversation. They include basic structure words like were, are, them, into. It is at this level that the poor reader is hampered by reading disability; learning is so impaired at this level that the reading deficient student is unable to cope with higher levels of vocabulary.

Remedy Suggestions for Standard Vocabulary Difficulties

When students experience difficulty at this, the lowest level of vocabulary, the teacher must take relatively extreme measures to insure that students will understand content in spite of the effect of reading disability.

One alternative is the buddy system. The reading disabled student can be paired with a more able reader, who will orally read the materials as the poor reader follows along. This practice serves two purposes: the disabled students obtain the information via oral channels so the reading disability is effectively eliminated, and the disabled reader absorbs many of the troublesome words since they are supplied, in context, as the more able reader's oral rendition parallels the disabled reader's silent reading. The teacher may consider taping this session so that the tape recording can be later used with other students. (Note: the teacher should avoid the temptation of tape-recording the text pages her/himself. Adult oral reading is too rapid for the disabled student to follow; a youngster reads slower and with more natural cadence than does the adult reader.)

Student guides can be prepared which direct students to ideas within specified paragraphs on particular pages. The student's task becomes that of scanning for direct information, rather than wading through layers of reading; much of the verbiage is effectively screened and the student can be directed to the most essential information. These study guides can have accompanying questions to check understanding. Herber, 1970, suggests that all students not be asked to answer all questions, but that they be keyed according to difficulty (i.e., one star indicates literal questions; two stars indicate interpretative questions; three stars indicate critical questions). Disabled readers could be asked to complete only literal level questions. More able students would be required to answer questions on higher levels. Students are motivated by such a differential assignment because they feel they are doing less work; most tend to do all of the questions anyway in an effort to find out what other students are being asked to do. Additional questions can be considered extra credit--success on them can compensate for errors on assigned questions.

It will be imperative that disabled students receive oral examinations; it is unfair that the student with reading deficiencies be given double

jeopardy with regard to her/his ability to demonstrate knowledge of social studies. Written test performance reflects more the students reading disability, not his/her lack of content information. A buddy,who is more able in reading, can read the test aloud; or the student can follow a tape recorded version of the test.

B. Transitional Vocabulary. These terms mean one thing in a student's real-life situation and another in the area of social studies. For example, bay may cause a student to think window when a teacher is trying to teach its meaning as a body of water; court might trigger tennis or basketball images when the judicial system is the focus. Likewise, many terms have varying meaning as they cross from one subject area to another. Ruler in mathematics is a measuring device, whereas in social studies it is a leader of a country. Root is part of a plant in science, a means of cheering on a team in physical education, the kernel of a sentence in English, and refers to multiple products in mathematics; but it is intended to be a cause (the root of the problem causing the outbreak of World War II was . . .) in social studies. Students don't naturally change their focus from other contexts; this would greatly impede understanding if an inappropriate meaning is associated with a social studies context.

Remedy Suggestions for Transitional Vocabulary

The teacher must explore with students the multiple meaning of words. When presenting a lesson, the teacher must pre-identify words that might likely have transitional meanings for students. These words can be reviewed prior to reading; meanings in real-life can be compared to meanings they will encounter in the content area. It must be emphasized that the student is to actively "change gears"; they must not bring to social studies previously learned, inappropriate meanings because it will impede meaning.

If students do have difficulty with this transition, the teacher can make use of a popular television show where the central character consistently misuses transitional words, with the final result being humor for the audience. Archie Bunkers can be introduced to the class; their task would be to identify those words which are inappropriately used in a social studies context:

(a) "Aw, Meathead, you don't know nothing about good places to move' California has them there earthquakes because of the St. Andrews fault."

(b) "Hey, Edith, look at that there pole with all the masks! Them eskimos call it an igloo there."

Such experiences serve to make students aware of similar-sounding words which can cause confusion in social studies. Further experiences using "Cracked Geography" where they are to find the crazy words and explain why the sentences are humorous:

(a) Yesterday was my brother's birthday, so Mom made Himalaya cake.

(b) Rebate means to put another worm on the hook.

(c) Before cars were invented, Spaniards were able to go for thousands of miles on a galleon.

C. Technical Vocabulary. Social studies teachers readily identify these words. They consist of words the students rarely encounter except in a social studies context; including judicial, longitude, meridian, mesa, arroyo. Since students do not commonly use these words in their everyday conversations, they are difficult to master due to lack of practice. Teacher must provide maximal practice to assure retention.

Additional subcategories of technical vocabulary are abbreviations and symbols. Abbreviations cause distinct difficulties when they bear little resemblance to the original word, i.e. lb., oz. Abbreviations assume that the students have considerable background knowledge of their derivation; i.e. NATO, GNP, UN. Symbols have no sound-symbol relationship to aid in their pronunciation; either students know them or they do not. Map symbols, for example, cannot be "sounded out" to arrive at their identity; students must over-learn their meaning. Many social studies word are derived from foreign terminology, like the terms arroyo and mesa cited above. Their unfamiliarity causes difficulty with mastery.

Remedy Suggestions for Techical Vocabulary

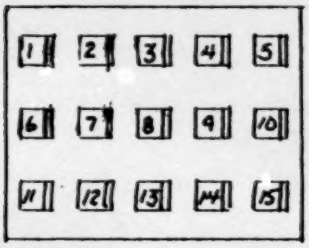
Students must be continually, and repeatedly, exposed to these words in the context of meaning, or they will be easily forgotten. Students will require practice. For such practice to be effective, the students must be actively involved in the use of the words.

The television game $20,000 Pyramid can be easily adapted to this type of practice. Student pairs take turns giving each other clue words. Partners must identify the category which includes all of the clue words to earn points. Activity should have a time limit of one minute. Examples: Clue words--Pacific,

Lake Huron, Mississippi River, Category--Bodies of Water. Example: Clue words--Washington, Lincoln, Nixon, Ford, Truman, Category--Presidents of the United States.

The television show Concentration can also be adapted to this level of vocabulary study. A board with 12 library card pockets should be devised (note: pockets are placed on their sides). In pairs, words with their definitions can be placed in pockets. Students take turns selecting pairs of numbers. The cards inside are revealed and a decision is made regarding their association. Matches result in points to the player. Nonmatches are placed back in the pockets. Game continues until all pockets are emptied.

Concentration Board



A variation of Twenty Questions can be played, where student picks a word in social studies. Other students must, in turn, ask questions about words in social studies to narrow down the identity of the word. For example: If the word were Lincoln, students might ask questions like:

(a) Is this person a foreigner? (NO)

(b) Is this person a great soldier? (NO)

(c) Is this person a President? (Yes) (d) What this president our first President? (NO) Questions continue until the unknown person's identity is established.

It is important that such instruction involve meaning; it must not be limited to rote memory or simple word identification tasks like Word Hunt activities. What Doesn't Belong activities illustrate this. Students must circle the "Red Herring" vocabulary term in sets of words:

(a) king/president/emperor

(b) judge/lawyer/doctor

(c) Sentate/House of Representatives/Supreme Court

D. Changeable Vocabulary. The meanings of these words change, as do the meanings of transitional vocabulary, but the meanings change within the area of social studies. Students may study culture in terms of a person's race (meaning a person's heritage) only to move to a unit on civics to find race to involve a vying for public office (presidential race).

Branch in geography alludes to a small stream, but in government it becomes a division of the system (branch of government).

Remedy Suggestions for Changeable Vocabulary

The teacher must identify these words prior to reading the unit/passage. Techniques appropriate for Transitional terms would be effective in this context.

E. Phrases. Social studies is replete with groups of words which do not function in an adjective-noun relationship. Their meaning is derived as a unit, not in terms of their modifying relationship. For example, a carpet bagger is not a bagger who carpets. Most noun-verb relationships can be reversed: a cute girl can be as easily expressed in the girl is cute and maintain the same meaning. But in social studies, the superior court is not a court that is superior (or better) than other courts, yet you can see how students could easily receive that impression.

Remedy Suggestions for Phrases

By identifying these "problem phrases" or having students identify them, the teacher can aid the students to use caution by directing them to reverse the order of such word pairs. If sense is retained, the meaning is usually direct; if the reversed phrase becomes nonsense, the student can be directed to use caution in its interpretion--the phrase must be taken as a unit to derive meaning.

Levels of Learning

As teachers work with students in directing their vocabulary understanding, care must be taken to guide students to high-levels of vocabulary comprehension. Forgan and Mangrum (1976) discuss these levels of teaching in three levels:

Specific: those vocabulary teaching techniques which require student to merely recognize the word when encountered and perhaps memorize a definition. No learning occurs beyond the literal level. Rote memory is emphasis.
Example: looking up lists of words in the dictionary; word hunts.

Functional: those vocabulary techniques which enable students to use the definition of the word and which allow student to recognize its function. Students demonstrate this by being able to freely use the word in conversation, insert the word in appropriate contexts, and identify the word when presented with its reworded definition.
Examples: crossword puzzles, Concentration, $20,000 Pyramid, Twenty Questions.

Conceptual: those techniques which move the student to understand multiple meanings of words in many contexts; especially as they related to an overriding concept or other content area.

Examples: Archie Bunkers, Cracked Geography, What Doesn't Belong, Twenty Questions, analogies.

Summary

A major factor contributing to student's lack of understanding of social studies text material is Vocabulary. Social studies terminology is of four levels: standard, transitional, technical, changeable, and phrases. Students must simultaneously deal with all these levels in order to derive information from text passages. Teachers must become aware of these levels of vocabulary, check continuously to determine if they are creating confusion as students deal with social studies text information, and direct effective remediation if such is the case.

As teachers do directed vocabulary teaching, they must move students above the specific level of vocabulary learning where they have memorized a word and an accompanying definition. Students will not naturally use the words and their definitions in their own conversations unless the teacher engineers such a situation; for the words to be retained at mastery level this practice will be imperative.

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